Losing the Subject:  
A critical Reading of Bio-Reductive Theories of Transsexuality

While much attention has been paid to the problem of stigmatizing transsexuality by placing “gender identity disorders” in the DSM (Butler 2004), and to the pathologization of transsexuals as evolutionary misfits or as “autogynephiles” (Blanchard, Bailey, Lawrence), less attention has been paid to the increasing literature that seeks a natural (hormonal, neurological, genetic or biological) explanation for the desire to change sex. I read these efforts as a continuation of the earlier medical models that sought an explanation for queerness in a so-called “gay gene”. The medical model in both instances seeks to account for the diversity represented by those whose performance of gender or sexual identities challenges the heteronormative gender order by means of some essential, organic bodily process, function, or element. Even when such accounts intend to value those diverse bodies and sexualities (and many simply intend to denounce them as abnormal, dysfunctional or deviant), they nevertheless rely on a model that reduces human subjectivity to the organism itself. My questions are: what is at stake in reaffirming the belief that nature is the primary cause of sexual diversity in human beings? What are the advantages and disadvantages of supporting this claim for transsexuals and others who aim to advance the social and political status of various sexual minorities?

After examining some of the recent claims made in studies of transsexuality in medical and/or scientific journals, and the recent embrace of biological reductionism by a feminist “new materialism,” (Hyrd, Wilson), I outline potential criticisms of this perspective by scientists, anthropologists, and queer theorists who share my concerns about its potentially damaging effects. I suggest that theorizing social and psychic complexity in the formation of subjective identities and sexualities is more promising for understanding and accepting diversity than asserting its natural basis. At the very least, the former provides a discourse with which to articulate human beings whose needs, desires, and choices are not predetermined by some natural cause that both drives and negates the subject.

Biography
Patricia Elliot is Associate Professor and Chair of Sociology at Wilfrid Laurier University. She teaches courses on gender, sexualities and embodiment. She has published articles on transsexuality in the journals Sexualities, Atlantis, and Studies in Gender and Sexuality. Her second book, Debates in Transgender, Queer and Feminist Theory: contested sites is forthcoming from Ashgate (2010).